

Assignment #3: My Identity as a Teacher

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I will discuss four overlapping aspects that work together to demonstrate how I conceive my role and identity as a teacher: the teaching acts, professionalism, personal identity, and mentorship.

The basics of teaching are the teaching acts, which the MELS identifies as lesson development (#3), instruction (#4), evaluation (#5) and class management (#6) (Québec, 2001), and which usually comprise the bulk of a teacher's paid time. While educational psychology and pedagogy research indicate principles and best practices (Ormrod et. al., 2010), much discretion remains for the teacher to account for differences in their students and educational setting. For this reason, how a teacher chooses to engage in the teaching acts—the “style” of the teacher—is a key aspect of their teacher-identity (Grant & Zeichner, 1984).

With respect to the teaching acts, I have various self-perceptions built through my own teaching experience. Teaching ESL students in Korea, for example, my classes were generally well-structured, and I would vary my method of instruction by using brief lectures, class response questions, quiet individual work, group discussions, and student group presentations. My approach to grading agrees with Robert Wolff (1969) in that its primary purpose should be for criticism, rather than evaluation or ranking, in order to improve students' understanding and subsequent performance.

The second aspect to discuss is that the teacher is a professional. This is also made explicit by the MELS, particularly in competencies 11 and 12 (Québec, 2001), which emphasize

professional development and professional behaviour. Professional development, consisting of self-observation and reflection as well as academic study (Grant & Zeichner, 1984; Québec, 2001; Ybarra, 1995) is important because it develops what Borich (2008) calls a “professional frame” of reference, from which teachers can make decisions informed by a body of professional knowledge and in awareness of their own background and biases. Professional behaviour includes aspects such as working with an educational team and the community to best facilitate student learning (Québec, 2001).

My own conception of teacher professionalism is fairly new and admittedly quite academic. Experiences in schools have not always reinforced my view of educators as professionals—indeed, some teachers I observed during my field experience behaved unprofessionally without consequence to themselves—so my idea of a professional teacher is more normative than descriptive: I see myself being a professional teacher.

Since a teacher’s personal identity affects their educational reactions (Mahlios et. al., 2008) and reflection on personal identity can improve educational outcomes (Stenberg, 2010), personal identity forms a significant part of teacher identity as well. It is my sense that this works in two ways: first, teachers bring their own identity and cultural heritage to their teaching (Québec, 2001), and second, teachers may have a sense of vocation—a calling to be a teacher—built into their personal identity (Royal Bank, 1995).

To illustrate my thoughts on how to use my own personal identity constructively in teaching, I will draw on a personal example. As a gay man, I am aware that being a visible representative of the LGBT community can combat harmful stereotypes instilled in students

and signal to LGBT students that I am supportive (Kosciw et al., 2010), so I have gradually decided to be “out” in my professional settings, though this may be difficult in practice. I anticipate that other parts of my personal identity will be less challenging to integrate into my teaching practice: for example, using my expertise to become a volleyball or debate coach.

The final aspect of teaching I will discuss is mentorship, which overlaps with my sense of teaching as vocation. Many educational philosophers have argued that the teacher must not just instruct but also care for the well-being of their students (Brighouse, 2006; Noddings, 1984), since education “leaves a permanent stamp on our characters” (Royal Bank, 1995, p. 13). Since so many student-teacher interactions exist outside the bounds of the formal curriculum, the teacher should go beyond it and be a mentor to facilitate the well-being of their students.

As I allude to above, the chance to be a mentor to youth is a large part of my motivation to teach. I conceive of my role as teacher as including extracurricular coaching, supporting students, providing academic resources outside class instruction, and organizing co-curricular learning activities such as field trips. Taking part in extra-curricular activities and working with individual students at James Lyng were high points of my field experience, and I plan to incorporate these into my teaching.

Teaching is complex and resists easy compartmentalization; I have modelled it as the intersection of four aspects—the teaching acts, professionalism, personal identity and mentorship—and discussed my own beginning teacher-identity in relation to these aspects. Perhaps above all, in contrast to those teachers who are “diffident about their occupation” (Royal Bank, 1995, p. 16), I conceptualize teaching as a vocation, and one to which I am called.

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